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Camellias in Southern California

Growing camellias is relatively easy for the homeowner in our mild Southern California climate. With the proper selection of plants, camellias can be found blooming in a variety of colors from September through April.

Camellias are native to Asia where they thrive in a slightly acid soil with moderately heavy rainfall and high humidity. To grow camellias successfully in Southern California, the environmental conditions need to be altered. This means acidifying the soil with organic mulches and supplementing the scanty rainfall we normally receive. At the same time, camellias can be grown under large trees or artificial shade structures such as lath or saran screening which provide 40-50% shade. Other suitable locations are: (1) on the north side of the house where an overhang will supply sufficient shade, and (2) on the east side of the house where the afternoon sun is blocked out. Camellias do not grow well along the coastal areas affected by ocean sprays and salty soils, nor will they tolerate areas of low humidity and high temperatures, as in the desert.

Planting: Many of the cultural problems associated with camellias can be traced to the original planting. They require constant moisture, yet are unable to survive in soils that hold water for long periods of time. Good drainage in the soil is essential. Camellias also like to have their roots close to the surface. A common mistake in planting is placing the new plant root ball below the surface of the existing soil level and planting too deep. To protect the surface roots during the summer from heat and lack of moisture, an organic mulch of several inches is recommended. Mulching materials should be kept away from the main trunk of the plant. Mulch should be cleaned of dead flowers and foliage each year to remove petal blight disease fungus which lives from season to season on dead flowers.

Watering: Camellias should have adequate moisture throughout the year. Plants that suffer from water deficiency during the summer will often drop their flower buds in the fall and winter or develop smaller than normal flowers. During the hot summer months it is often advisable to wash down the foliage to remove dust and grime, to cool the plant down, and increase the humidity.

Fertilizing: There are many fertilizer products on the market which are labeled specifically for camellias and azaleas. The recommended amount of fertilizer and directions on the package should be followed closely. Scatter fertilizers under the drip-line of the plant and water thoroughly after feeding. The best times to apply fertilizer in Southern California are March, May, and August.

Species grown: There are three main species of camellias which are grown locally: (1) *C. sasanqua*, a shrub which is often used for landscaping, for a border hedge, or to espalier; (2) *C. reticulata*, which thrives in partial shade and which produces one of the most spectacular blooms; and (3) *C. japonica*, which is relatively shade-loving and which has developed by far the most common and prevalent varieties. There are some 5,000 named cultivars of these three species. In addition, a number of interspecific hybrids have been developed. Today, many camellia hobbyists and plant breeders are working toward the development of hybrid camellias which will bloom early, produce better flowers with distinct fragrance, and which are more cold-hardy.

(OVER)

CAMELLIA BLOOMING CHART

September:

Camellia sasanqua 'Jean May'
 C. s. 'Narumi-Gate'
 C. s. 'Rosy Mist'
 C. s. 'Showa-No-Sakae'
 Camellia japonica 'Yohei Haku'
 C. j. 'Are-Jishi'

color

Shell pink
 White shaded pink
 Pink
 Soft pink
 White shaded pink
 Dark salmon-rose

October & November:

C. j. 'High Hat'
 C. j. 'Joshua E. Youtz'
 C. j. 'Daitairin'
 C. j. 'Alba Plena'
 C. j. 'Mrs. Goodwin Knight'
 C. j. 'Debutante'

Light pink
 White
 Light rose pink
 White
 Deep orchid-pink
 Pink

December:

C. j. 'Lucy Hester'
 C. j. 'Laura Walker'
 C. j. 'Richard Nixon'

 C. j. 'Berenice Boddy'

 C. j. 'C. M. Wilson'
 C. j. 'Dr. John D. Bell'

 C. j. 'Gigantea'

Silver pink
 Bright red
 White shaded pink & striped
 rose pink
 Light pink with deep pink
 under petals
 Light pink
 Dark red heavily variegated
 white
 Red marbled white

January & February:

C. j. 'Pink Clouds'

 C. j. 'Sunset Glory'
 C. j. 'Kick Off'
 C. j. 'Grand Slam'
 C. j. 'Cardinal's Cap'
 C. j. 'Betty Sheffield'

 C. j. 'Herme'

Cream pink and marked
 deeper pink changing to
 light lavender pink as
 flower ages
 Coral pink
 Pale pink marked deep pink
 Brilliant dark red
 Cardinal red
 White striped and blotched
 red & pink
 Pink petals with irregular
 white border and streaked
 deep pink

March & April:

Camellia reticulata 'William Hertrich'
 C. r. 'Lion Head'
 C. j. 'Te Deum'
 C. j. 'Purity'
 C. j. 'Blood of China'
 C. j. 'Fred Sander'

Deep cherry red
 Deep turkey red
 Dark red
 White
 Deep salmon red
 Pink & pink variegated

May:

C. j. 'Eleanor Hagood'
 C. j. 'Elena Nobile'

Pale pink
 Flame red

Additional information can be obtained at:

Los Angeles State and County Arboretum - 681-8411,
 Descanso Gardens - 790-5571,
 South Coast Botanic Garden - 772-5813.